

A

000036150

1



The CAT and the CANARY

California
Regional
Library

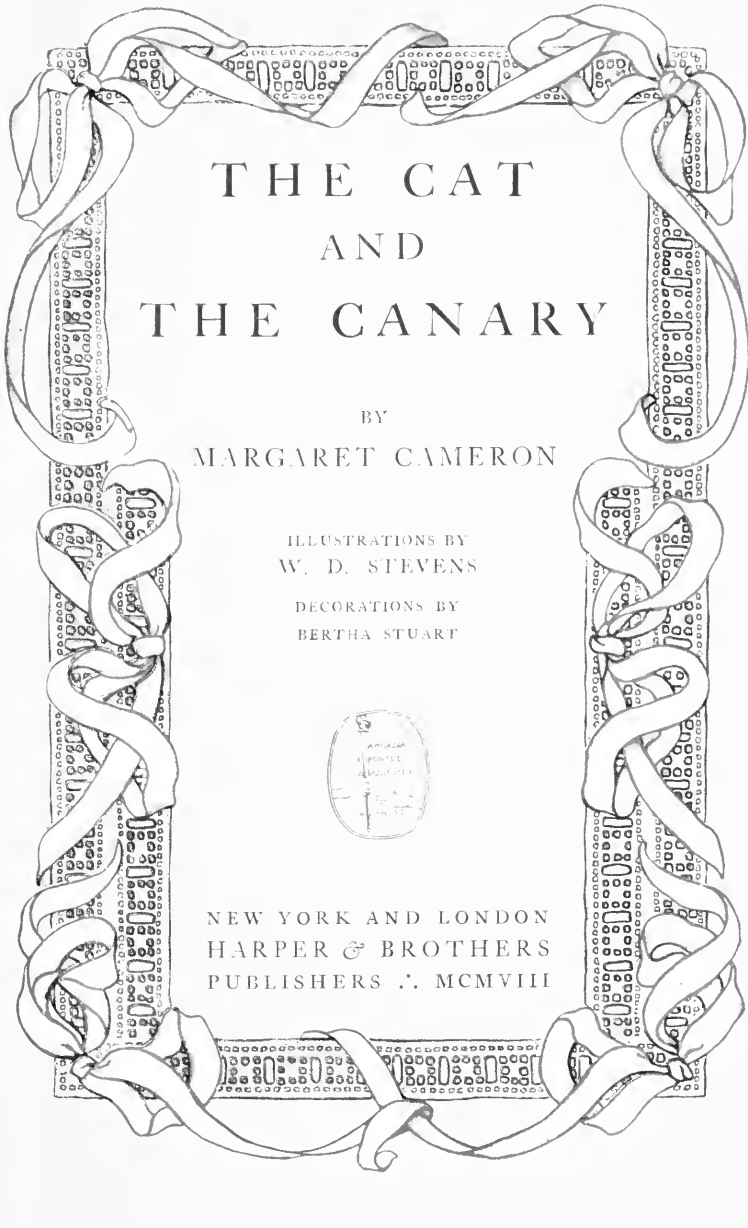
MARGARET CAMERON

THE LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
LOS ANGELES

Jacob W. Coward, '09



“‘BARRY McLEAN, DO YOU THINK I’D OFFER THE COOK’S
NIGHT-DRESS TO MRS. BAXTER?’”



THE CAT AND THE CANARY

BY
MARGARET CAMERON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
W. D. STEVENS

DECORATIONS BY
BERTHA STUART



NEW YORK AND LONDON
HARPER & BROTHERS
PUBLISHERS ./. MCMVIII

Copyright, 1908, by HARPER & BROTHERS.

All rights reserved.

Published February, 1908.

ILLUSTRATIONS

"BARRY McLEAN, DO YOU THINK I'D OFFER THE COOK'S NIGHT-DRESS TO MRS. BAXTER?"	. . . . .	<i>Frontispiece</i>
"HE MADE AT ONCE FOR THE OBJECT OF HIS QUEST"	. . . . .	<i>Facing p. 26</i>
"HEY! THIEF! THIEF! STOP THIEF!"	"	30
"LET ME UP, YOU IDIOT!" HE GASPED"	. . . . .	" 32
"THERE REMAINED FOR THE McLEANS NOTHING BUT ACQUIESCENCE"	. . . . .	" 46
"HIS RIGHT DRAGGED FORTH SOME- THING LONG AND WHITE"	. . . . .	" 58

THE
CAT AND THE CANARY

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

IT was Monday evening. Barry McLean was sitting with his wife and their elderly guests, the Baxters, on the terrace at the Country Club, lazily sipping a cup of tea and watching the gleam of fire-flies out among the trees, when suddenly Pauline impaled him with a glance, pinning him to a consciousness of impending disaster.

“Eh!” he involuntarily ejaculated.
“What is it, dear?”

She furtively and imperatively sig-

[1]

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

nalled silence, turning at once to Mrs. Baxter with an animation that her husband knew to be artificial.

When, presently, he left them to get the automobile, she excused herself and followed him, clutching his arm as they rounded the corner of the club-house.

“Barry, I’ve had the most awful thought!”

“What is it?”

“We’ve just asked those people to stay all night—and I haven’t a fresh night-dress to my name that I can offer her!”

“Wh—what!”

“Last week Laurie poured a bottle of ink over the laundry basket

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

and ruined two of my very best ones."

"Little imp!" murmured Laurie's father, secretly much entertained by this feat of his son's.

"Another came home from the French laundry simply falling to pieces—I don't know what those people did to it, but it's utterly past mending—and two others are in the wash. You know our laundress doesn't come until to-morrow."

"But—but you don't mean to say that's all you have!"

"Yes. I've let my supply run low lately because—oh, because I've been so busy breaking up and moving and all! I haven't had time to replenish

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

my clothes. And besides—the semi-annual sales come next month.” A tinge of defiance colored her tone, for she knew that her thrifty patronage of sales somewhat irritated her lord.

“H’mph!” he sniffed. “Well, what are you going to do?”

“That’s what I don’t know! What can I do?”

“Haven’t you *anything*?”

“Not a thing.”

“Borrow one.”

“From whom? I don’t know a soul on this side of the river. If we’d lived here a month, I might have at least a bowing acquaintance with my next-door neighbor, but—I can’t very well go to perfect strangers at midnight and

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

wake them up to borrow a night-dress, can I?"

"No, I suppose not." In spite of himself he laughed at her plaintive tone, but immediately curbed his amusement, recognizing her genuine distress. "Why not get one from one of the maids?"

"The maids! Barry McLean, do you think I'd offer the cook's night-dress to Mrs. Baxter?"

A vision of Mrs. Baxter, cool, mirthless, and exquisitely fastidious, crossed his mind.

"No, I suppose not," he again replied.

"Oh, if the washing were only done, I could iron one myself, at a pinch!

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

Why doesn't our woman come on Monday?"

"Give it up. I suppose it wouldn't do to offer her my pajamas? There are those silk ones, you know." Her glance shattered his suggestion. "No, I suppose it wouldn't do. Why not tell her? Wouldn't she understand?"

"Not in the least. She lives by clock-work—and *she* never had to move a thousand miles, with a small boy and a sick nurse! She couldn't understand,—and if she did, it wouldn't alter the situation, would it?"

"No, of course not."

"Barry, there must be a shop somewhere within ten miles. Take us home quickly, invent some excuse for

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

leaving us, find a shop and a man with a key to it, and make him sell you—”

“At this hour? It would take half the night. Besides, they’d probably think I was drunk and have me run in.”

“Well, then, find a shop and break into it.”

“Nonsense! The thing is simply to make the best of it. Explain the whole situation to Mrs. Baxter—”

“Barry, dear, I couldn’t do it! If it were anybody else—any other sort of woman—anybody I knew well—if she had even the vaguest sense of humor—but not Mrs. Baxter! I could not do it!”

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

“Well, then, what the deuce—”

“I don’t know! I’ve got to go back to them. But think, Barry! Think! Somehow — someway — we’ve got to beg, borrow, or steal a presentable night-dress for that woman, for explain to her I *cannot!*”

The McLeans had entertained the Baxters at dinner, and subsequently the four had taken a long drive, through warm, moonlit air, in the host’s inexpensive but reliable little car, stopping on their way home for rest and refreshment at the Country Club, where a business acquaintance had put McLean up for a fortnight, hoping to secure him as a member.

The dinner, though modest, had

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

been perfect, and the drive no less so. Under the genial influence of the evening, Mrs. Baxter had unbent, until Pauline had temporarily forgotten the trepidation with which, scarcely yet settled in her new abode or wonted to her new servants, she had anticipated the coming of this critical elder woman; and in Mr. Baxter's expansive mood Barry found cause for self-gratulation. McLean had recently come from the West to form a new company, requiring a much larger investment than his own firm could command, and Elihu Baxter's capital and Elihu Baxter's influence would be alike invaluable to him.

The earlier part of the drive had

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

been marred by the suppressed anxiety ever bred by the presence of city guests at suburban entertainments, concerning the correctness of timepieces and the exact moment of train departure. Encouraged by the gracious mood of the visitors, however, and warmly seconded by his wife, McLean had finally won the consent of the couple to remain over night, and thereafter no cloud had dimmed the effulgence of his content until he had been transfixed by that glance from Pauline.

Mechanically he brought the car around and attended to the comfort of his party. Mechanically he responded to question and comment as they hummed through the illumined

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

night, his mind still busy with Pauline's problem. They were within a few blocks of home when his attention was arrested by a sudden inquiry from Mr. Baxter, apparently apropos of nothing.

"By - the - way, Mr. McLean, have you approached John L. Corson with this proposition of yours?"

"No," said Barry, instantly alert.

"Why don't you?"

"I have wanted to, but I understand that Mr. Corson is somewhat difficult to interest, and I've not cared to make the attempt until I could do it in the right way."

"I see. H'm. You'd like to meet him?"

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

"Very much."

"H'm. He's going to take lunch with me to-morrow. Will you join us?"

"With pleasure." Barry's tone was quiet, but his very soul sung within him, for here was indisputable proof that, despite their brief acquaintance, he had won Elihu Baxter's confidence and support. Men were not lightly asked to meet John L. Corson. And if, with Mr. Baxter's help, he could interest Mr. Corson in his project, his mission in the East would be brought to a successful issue, the new company formed under the most auspicious conditions, and his own future—with that of his wife and son—would be practically assured.

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

"He's rather eccentric, as I dare say you've heard," pursued the guest. "Never takes anybody's estimate of a man. Always forms his own—sometimes in queer ways. You never know how a thing's going to affect him, even when it's funny—and his sense of humor is one of the keenest things about him. I was reminded of him because I think he lives somewhere in this vicinity, doesn't he?"

"Does he? You see, we've been here so short a time, we don't know much about the neighborhood."

"I believe he does. I've never been at his house, but I understand he lives in one of these little suburbs. Why a man with his income should prefer

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

a village street to a city house or a country place I won't attempt to explain. That's a part of Corson's eccentricity. He's simple in his tastes—very. Now there, for instance, is an attractive place, but who wouldn't prefer fifty or a hundred acres of Long Island or up the Hudson?"

They were passing a large, handsome house, set between other houses, and with pleasing but not large grounds.

"This must be an honest neighborhood," commented Mrs. Baxter at the moment that Pauline leaned forward and closed tense fingers on her husband's arm.

"Why?" asked Barry, swinging the automobile around a corner.

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

"The washing is still hanging out in that back yard!" To their guests Mrs. McLean's tone conveyed only the surprised disapproval of the systematic housewife; to her husband it was vibrant with suggestion.

"Nonsense!" he replied, opposing the undercurrent.

"But it is! I saw it!" persisted Pauline, tightening her grasp. There was a surreptitious movement of her other hand, and something shot from it into the street.

"It undoubtedly is," affirmed Mrs. Baxter. "How can any one be so careless?"

"Probably the mistress of the house is away," said Pauline, "and the mice

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

are consequently at play. They ought to lose something—temporarily—as a warning.” Again she pressed the arm. “Retribution should overtake them.”

“Well, probably it will, properly and in due course,” responded McLean, adding, rather enigmatically, to his guests, “Anyhow, I’m no journeyman Providence!”

“Barry, please stop!” cried his wife an instant later, as they veered into another street. “I’ve lost my gloves!”

He obediently slowed up, suggesting: “You probably dropped ’em on the floor of the car. We’ll find them when we get home.”

“No, I—I rather think they went overboard.”

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

"Oh, well, that being the case, they're gone!" He would have started on.

"No, no! Please! They're new. I don't want to lose them."

"But, my dear girl, we've covered thirty or forty miles to-night! We can't—"

"I had them just a minute ago, dear—had them in my hand."

McLean turned in his seat to scrutinize her, and in her face he read supplication.

"I'm sorry to be a nuisance," she wistfully added. "I know it seems stupid, but would you mind walking back to look for them? I saw something drop out just after we turned

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

the corner this side of—of the house where the washing was, just before this last turn. I'm sure it was the gloves."

"Oh, well, get some more!"

"I can't! Mamma brought them to me from Paris. It won't take five minutes—and Mr. and Mrs. Baxter will humor my weakness?"

The guests promptly offered assurance of their entire sympathy with her, and added their request to hers that a search be made for the missing gloves.

"We'll wait here while you walk back. It isn't over half a block, and we couldn't see them from the car," concluded Pauline.

"All right; just as you say."

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

McLean stepped down from his seat. "I'll go and look for them, Polly—but I make no promises," he added to her pleading eyes.

"Oh, I know they're there. It will be *so* easy—and don't you come back empty-handed!"

As he strode through the deserted, shade-checkered street, the skirts of his long dust-coat flapping about his knees, he laughed, half in irritation and half in tenderness. How absurd of Polly to insist upon making such an opportunity for him, or to imagine for an instant that he would take advantage of it! He admitted that the situation was probably an awkward one for her, but surely there could be nothing very hu-



THE CAT AND THE CANARY

miliating in a frank statement of the fact to Mrs. Baxter. Still, explanations were never easy to Polly. In spite of her four years of motherhood, she was still in many ways like a child herself—a shy, wistful, trusting little child; and, remembering this, the heart of Pauline's husband grew very tender towards her, and all the irritation was dissolved.

“Poor girl!” he said to himself. “I wish I could help her! I would if I could—but I draw the line at robbing my neighbor's clothes-line!” And then he saw the gloves.

They were lying a little to the side of the broad, moonlit street, and beyond them, stretching straight before

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

him, was an alley, presumably intersecting the block and certainly touching, at the back, the place which they had seen and commented upon from the front. Barry dropped the gloves into his pocket and stood looking amusedly down the lane.

“Clever child!” he murmured. “Bright, quick-witted little girl! And now—I’ll go back and give you your gloves.”

Instead, however, he stood staring absently down the alley. He knew just what would happen when Pauline found that he had heeded only the letter of her request. The wistful, childish look of grieved wonder would widen her eyes for a moment, her lip



THE CAT AND THE CANARY

would tremble ever so slightly, and then she would laugh and begin talking of something else. But the hurt look would linger in her eyes, and he hated to be responsible for it. Still—

He shrugged his shoulders and turned to retrace his way to the waiting car. Polly should not have expected of him anything so absurd, so unreasonable, so obviously impossible—and there he halted, sharply confronted by memories of more than one occasion when she had not paused to consider the wisdom of his desires. She had only to know that they *were* his desires, even though she did not understand them. Never once, in any crisis, had she failed him. This very

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

matter of entertaining the Baxters at this time was an exemplification of her cordial readiness to sacrifice her comfort and convenience to his wishes, and now—

“I wonder--”

He strolled on around the corner, where he informed himself as to the name of the street, and past the house in question, noting its number and the white gleam of linens hanging in the moonlight behind a thin screen of shrubbery, after which he sauntered back to his former position at the mouth of the alley. The streets were entirely deserted and every house was dark.

Taking out his pocket - book, he

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

searched through its contents until he found a new, firm five-dollar bill, which he ruminatively regarded after he had replaced the flat little leather book. Presently he broke into laughter.

“Gad! I’ll make a try for it, anyhow!” he exclaimed, under his breath, thrusting the crumpled bill into the side-pocket of his coat.

A tingling, predatory zest of adventure, dormant these many years, awoke and took possession of him; and with it, a background for the vivid glow of the moment, came shadowy visions of certain orchards and watermelon-patches of his bucolic youth.

Speculatively he eyed the tall board fences, as he slipped along them

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

through the alley, estimating their height and his own agility. The gate, he decided, when finally he came to it, was not to be trusted. It would probably be locked and would certainly creak. He had even heard of back gates which were electrically connected with bells in the house. Somewhat ruefully he glanced from his evening clothes to the painted fence, realizing that he had not dressed the part. However, he slipped off the long linen coat—first transferring the bill to his waistcoat-pocket—and threw it over the top of the fence to serve as a partial protection for his clambering knees. He resisted a natural desire to remove also his dinner-jacket, for he foresaw



THE CAT AND THE CANARY

that he might make a hurried exit, and that it would not be desirable to reach the haven of the waiting automobile breathless from running and without his coat. Whimsically wondering what he should do if there should happen to be a dog, he gathered himself together, jumped, caught the top of the fence, and pulled himself up.

“All serene!” he triumphantly told himself. “No dog, no lights, no obstacles—and a full clothes-line!” Thereupon he dropped softly into a freshly spaded bed and made at once for the object of his quest.

“Ha! Here we are! Feels like a cobweb and looks like sea-foam. All lace and embroidery and frills and



"HE MADE AT ONCE FOR THE OBJECT OF HIS QUEST"

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

things. Surely this is all right! Anyhow, it's decidedly the best-looking one. How the deuce do I get the thing? Oh, I see!" He pulled off the clothes-pins and took down the filmy white garment, laying it across his arm while he fumbled in his pocket for the five-dollar bill, which he pinned to the line where the night-dress had been. "That's by way of being rent," he chuckled. "Next week this household will be astounded by the mysterious return of this article—by mail—from New York. There you are! Guess that will stick!" He pulled gently at the bill to make certain that it was firmly secured, and then turned his attention to his booty.

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

Perplexed for the moment by the necessity of secreting it so that it should not attract the attention of their guests on his return to the automobile, its soft texture speedily solved the problem, and, rapidly unbuttoning his waistcoat, he wound the delicate fabric snugly around him like a belt, and by dint of some effort succeeded in rebuttoning the waistcoat over it, reflecting the while that his dust-coat would effectually conceal any unnatural rotundity which might otherwise be evident on the way home. Once arrived there, it would be a simple matter to excuse himself long enough to rearrange his apparel.

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

"After which," he contentedly concluded, "it's up to Polly."

He turned to depart, but paused. In his pockets, after some search, he found a scrap of paper, and on it scrawled: "Requisitioned in the Queen's name. Return next week." This he pinned carefully to the line with the bill.

Emerging from the enveloping drifts of fresh-laundered linen, he was making his way rapidly to the spot where his coat lay over the fence, when an upper window was flung open and an irate masculine voice shouted:

"Hey, there! What are you doing?"

McLean lost no time in explanation. He leaped to the boundary, not even glancing in the direction whence the

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

voice had come, set his foot on the lower girder, and jerked himself to the top of the fence. As he did so he felt his sleeve crack at the shoulder, but the incident seemed of little consequence in that moment.

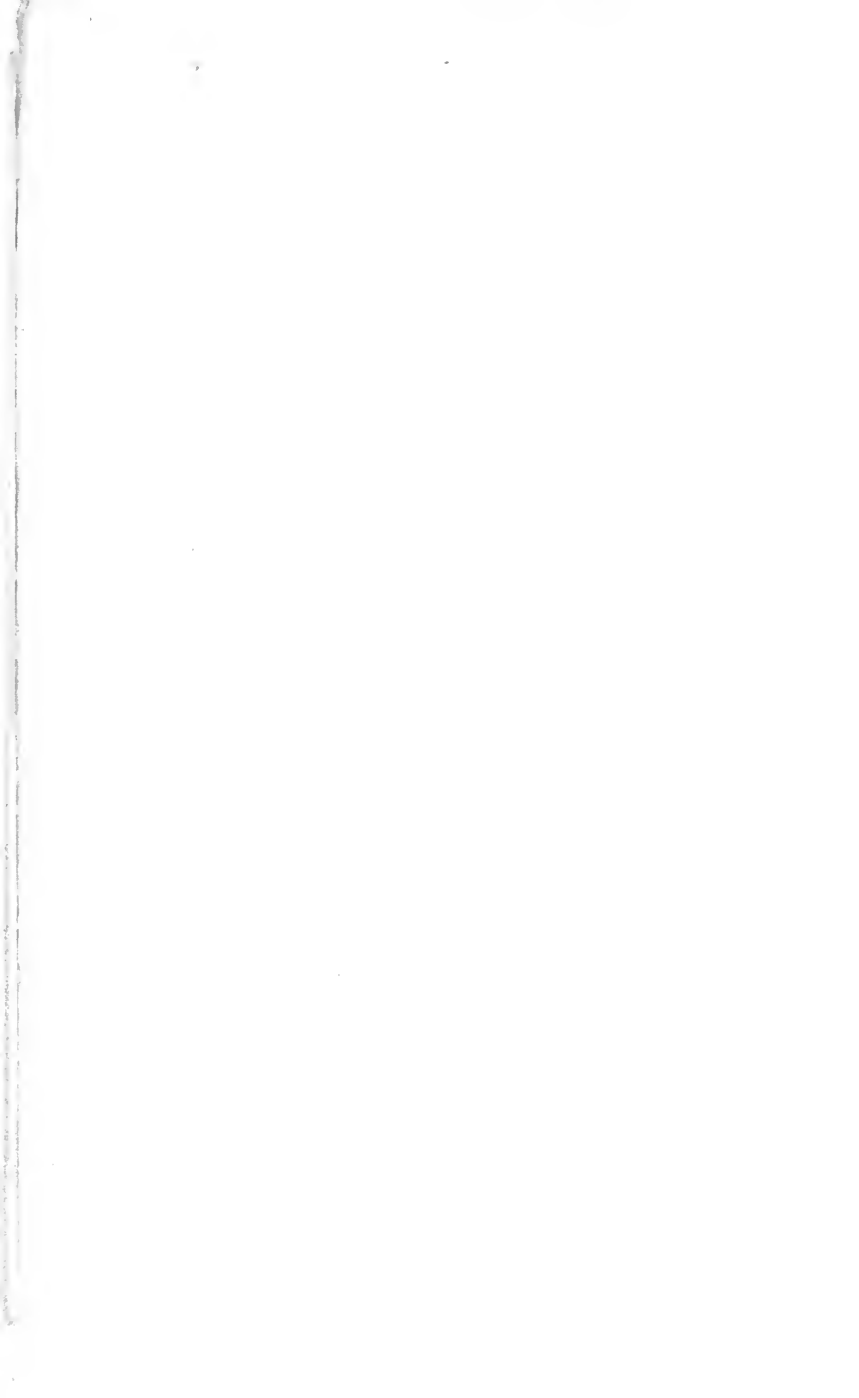
“Hey! Thief! Thief! Stop thief!”

Barry dropped into the alley, snatched his linen coat, and ran in the shadow of the fences towards the street, followed by the piercing tremolo of a police whistle vigorously blown.

In his college days McLean had had some reputation as a runner, and he was fully living up to it when he reached the junction of the alley and the street down which he expected to turn. It chanced that a man making



"HEY! THIEF! THIEF! STOP THIEF!"



THE CAT AND THE CANARY

equal speed down the street reached the same point at the same moment, and the two came into sharp collision, with the natural and inevitable result. In falling, Barry became entangled in the folds of the long coat, which he had hung over his arm, and before he could extricate himself and arise, the party of the second part recovered his equilibrium sufficiently to seize McLean by the collar and bear him again to earth; which done, he planted a firm knee on the captive's shoulder and lustily shouted to him of the shrilling whistle:

“Hi! Hi, there! Here's your man! I've got him!”

“What? Got him?”

[31]

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

"Yep. Hurry along!"

"All right. Hold him!"

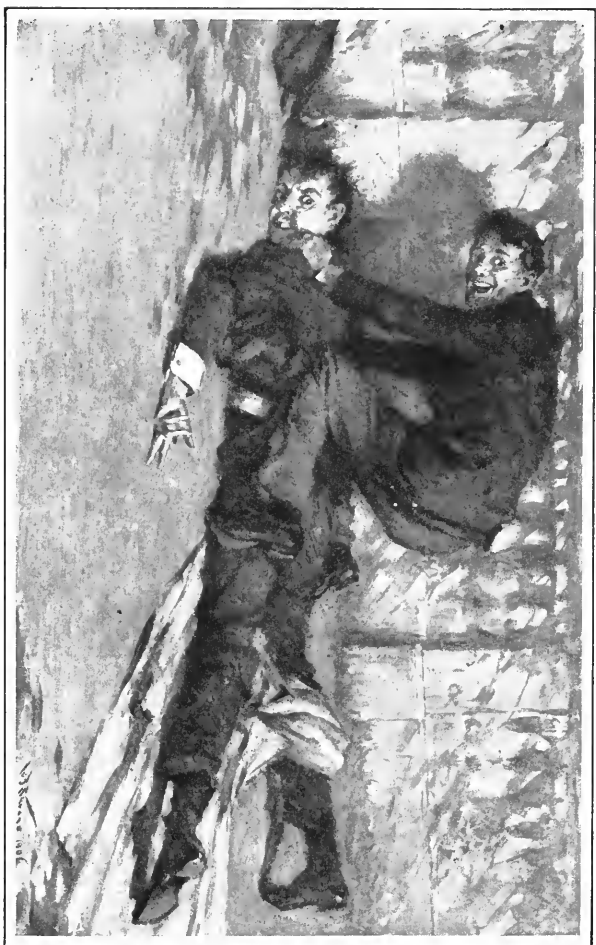
From the opposite direction floated an inquiring "*honk, honk*," which the prostrate man recognized as addressed to him.

"Let me up, you idiot!" he gasped, struggling.

"Not on your life!" replied a cheerful if rather breathless young voice. "Think I'm going to be catapulted to the brink of eternity by a chap of your ilk—lie still or I'll thump you!—just for the fun of letting him get away after I've caught him? Nixie! *Nimmer!*"

"But you're mistaken! I'm not—not your man."

"No? You weren't leaving that



"LET ME UP, YOU IDIOT" HE GASPED



THE CAT AND THE CANARY

glittering wake of police whistle behind you, I suppose? Well, that's a difference of opinion which we'll settle later."

"*Honk! honk!*" anxiously urged the horn, under Pauline's fingers.

"Let me up! Don't you know a man of your own caste when you hear him speak?"

Voice and accent are their own credentials, and McLean's captor, turning an attentive gaze upon his prisoner, eventually removed the knee of oppression.

"All right," said he. "Get up. But don't try any funny business or there'll be more trouble for you right away. Here comes your friend."

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

From the street on which the house fronted came the sound of hurrying feet, and presently, while Barry brushed himself off, recovered his hat, and slipped into his dust-coat to cover his torn and dishevelled raiment, they were approached by a corpulent, gray-haired, heavy-voiced man, who panted slightly from running.

“Oh, hello!” said the young fellow, as the other joined them. “I thought that sounded like your voice!”

“That you, Garrick? Got him?”

“Yep. Caught him red-handed.”

“I admit the capture, but not the rubescence,” said McLean, with a short laugh. At the words the newcomer turned towards him sharply

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

and in evident surprise, scrutinizing him in the moonlight.

"You don't look like a thief," he said, bluntly. "Sure you got the right man, Phil?"

"Well, if you'd seen him sprinting down the alley—"

"Your friend caught me, as I caught him — running," lightly interrupted McLean, following up his apparent advantage. "His greater agility in recovering his footing explains our present relative positions, which otherwise might have been reversed."

"*Honk? Honk, honk! Honk?*" imperatively demanded Pauline, around the next corner.

"You're in evening dress!"

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

"I was," a trifle grimly, "until I met your athletic friend here."

"I don't think there can be any doubt about him, sir," eagerly explained the youth addressed as Garrick. "He was running like the very—"

"So were you," interrupted McLean.

"Yes, but I was running *towards* the whistle," was the significant reply, "and, by the same token, I got what was coming to me!"

"The man I saw wore dark clothes," said the older man.

"So did this one. He carried the duster on his arm."

"The only way I could identify him would be by a tear in the shoulder of

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

his coat. I noticed that as he went over the fence.”

“Was he in your house, sir?”

“No. At least, not that I have discovered. I had just come in—been playing bridge around at the doctor’s—and was on my way up-stairs, when I noticed, from a window on the landing, a suspicious movement among some clothes hanging in the back yard. I stopped to see what it meant, and at that moment a man came out from them. I opened the window and called to him, and he jumped the fence. Then I blew the whistle.”

“I heard the whistle”—Garrick took up the narrative—“and thought it came from the street ahead there, so

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

I was making tracks for the scene, when this chap came flying out of the alley, caught me amidships, and we both went down. Now, what were *you* doing?"

"*Ho-onk! Ho-onk! Ho-onk, honk, honk!*" wailed the horn.

"My automobile is around the corner there," replied McLean, "with my wife and some guests who have been dining with us. My wife missed her gloves, and I came back to look for them. I heard the whistle, and not caring to get mixed up in a scrap—and knowing that my friends would naturally be somewhat alarmed by the sound of a police whistle coming from this direction—I decided to

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

get back to them as quickly as possible."

"Well, you were making good time!" dryly commented his captor.

"Down a blind alley," the third man added. "This doesn't go through to the next street."

"Looking for his wife's gloves, dropped from an automobile," supplemented Garrick.

"Oh, I found the gloves."

"Quite so." The householder's decision was evidently formed. "Well, my interesting friend, we'll just turn you over to the police and let them see what else you 'found' down that alley." McLean opened his lips to speak, but the other checked him with

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

a gesture. "I admit that you don't look like a thief, but somehow," quizzically, "you haven't exactly the aspect of maligned innocence, either. I imagine the cat that ate the canary looked something as you do when he was discovered."

"Honk! Honk! Honk!"

The lights of an automobile circled around the corner and the machine bore down upon the group.

"I suppose that's your car," ironically inquired Garrick.

"It is," replied McLean, between his teeth; "my car—and my wife."

"Barry? Barry, is that you?" The automobile swung in towards the curb and stopped.

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

"Yes, here I am. It's all right."

"Did anything happen? We heard a police whistle and shouting, and we were afraid that— Why didn't you come back? Mr. Baxter said—"

"Baxter?" said the man beside McLean, incredulously. "Is that Elihu Baxter?"

"Eh?" queried that gentleman, peering at the standing group, whose faces were in shadow. "Why—bless me, this is fortunate!" He nimbly hopped out of the car and joined the bewildered men on the sidewalk, warmly shaking hands with the one who had hailed him. "Speak of the — ahem! We were just talking about you. I

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

see you've already made Mr. McLean's acquaintance."

"Um—hardly," was the rejoinder. "We were simply discussing the—er—the occasion for all that whistling. You say this is a friend of yours?"

"Mr. McLean is a young man in whom I have lately become very much interested. I've just arranged to have him take lunch with us to-morrow. This"—turning to his dismayed host—"as you have undoubtedly guessed, is Mr. Corson."

The introduction was formally acknowledged, and involuntarily Barry closed his eyes as he saw his new-born hopes go shuddering into chaos, for in

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

Mr. Corson's steely glance there was no softening.

"You've met Mr. McLean recently, you say?" the capitalist grimly inquired.

"Yes. He has just come on from the West in connection with some business which we'll discuss with you tomorrow. To-night Mrs. Baxter and I have been dining— By-the-way, you've never met my wife, have you? Come over and be presented."

"I'll be going on," quietly suggested Garrick in Corson's ear. "This is evidently all right, and you don't need me any longer."

"I am not sure about that," was the low reply. "It's up to somebody to

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

explain or apologize—and it may be us.” His tone was sceptical. “Anyhow, you’d better stay and see it through.”

Accordingly the four men stepped over to the car and general introductions followed. It was explained that Mr. and Mrs. Baxter had been persuaded, while driving, to remain overnight, and the pleasure of both couples in this unexpected extension of the visit was duly dwelt upon.

Thereafter, by a few well-directed questions, Mr. Corson satisfied himself that his friend’s acquaintance with McLean was limited and of brief duration, and that their relations were based rather upon confidence than upon any

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

absolute knowledge possessed by the older man. When, therefore, Pauline, vaguely alarmed by a danger scented but not perceived, suggested that the hour was late and that they had best be moving homeward, Mr. Corson interposed a protest.

“By no means!” he objected, a strongly detaining hand on Barry’s arm. “I make no promises for your business proposition to-morrow, Baxter, but to-night I share your interest in this young man to such an extent that I am unwilling to let him out of my sight until I know more of him. Besides, you’ve never been in my house and you may never be so near it again. My daughter, who is also my house-

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

keeper, is away for the night, but I guess we can find a bottle and some biscuits. Anyhow, you must come in. I insist."

Mr. Baxter, delighted by the capitalist's interest in his protégé, promptly accepted the invitation, and there remained for the McLeans nothing but acquiescence.

Arrived at the house, Mr. Baxter immediately and properly divested himself of his dust-coat.

"If you don't mind," said Barry to his jailer-host, "and if the ladies will excuse me, I'll keep mine on. I—I'm afraid I'm not presentable underneath." Then, seeing the surprised glances of his own party, he added,



"THERE REMAINED FOR THE MCLEANS NOTHING BUT
ACQUIESCENCE"

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

nervously: "About the time that police whistle went off, I came into sudden and violent contact with a fellow who was running at a lively clip, and—"

"Barry! Were you hurt?" cried his wife.

"Not in the least." He attempted a reassuring smile.

"You were! You're as white as death!"

"You're imaginative, Polly. I was not in the least hurt, but he bowled me over, and as a consequence I'm pretty dusty and dishevelled, I'm afraid."

"Never mind that! We'll make allowances." As he spoke, Garrick, who had been surreptitiously brushing

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

himself off, deftly seized the collar of McLean's coat and turned it well down over his back. "Ah?" said he, quietly. "You must have had quite a tumble. *Your sleeve is torn out at the shoulder.*"

Meanwhile his unexpected action had pulled the screening folds away from McLean's figure in front, and Mr. Corson's alert glance lingered an instant on the strange and unusual bulge at the waist-line before sweeping on to Barry's flushed and guilty face.

"Yes, quite so." He turned towards the drawing-room. "We'll not misinterpret Mr. McLean's very natural desire not to take off his coat, under

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

the circumstances. Will you come this way, ladies?"

"Mr. Corson," desperately said Barry, "I'd like a moment with you—to explain—"

"No further explanation is necessary, Mr. McLean. We quite understand. And I assure you your appearance is irreproachable." The tone was entirely courteous, but in the cold eyes and rigid lines about the mouth Barry read inflexible conviction, and he preceded the vigilant Garrick into the adjoining room, moodily brooding over the wreck his impulsive prank had made.

It was not that he feared conviction or even suspicion of theft when he should have explained the situation

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

to Mr. Corson, as, of course, he must explain it before leaving the house. The five-dollar bill pinned to the clothes-line would bear mute testimony to his honest intention. But it was bitter irony that he would have to make this explanation to this particular man at this time, not only precluding the possibility of his enlisting Mr. Corson's help in carrying out the business project which was of vital importance to him and to those whom he represented, but reflectively alienating Mr. Baxter, who naturally would be wary of intrusting his own interests or committing those of his friends to the judgment of a man capable of this piece of boyish folly.

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

Thus mentally chafing, he still bore his part, as did his wife, in the light chit - chat around the dining - table, where they were sitting over the beer and cheese sandwiches brought by a sleepy maid. But now and again, in the midst of the laughter, Pauline's troubled eyes searched his face, vainly seeking reassurance and comfort, and ever he avoided meeting her glance. Over and over the situation turned itself in his mind, and he saw but one way out—and that way the path to failure. And like a man sick of a fever and stung by a gnat, he tossed under the thought that he could not now save Pauline from humiliation in Mrs. Baxter's sight.

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

Then, like a meteor, opportunity flashed across his sky.

The conversation had drifted from automobiling to war, and from India to Manhattan roof-gardens. It was in this connection that Phil Garrick asked:

"Has any one seen that fellow de Vigne at Prochstein's? That's a great stunt of his! I've seen it four times, and I call it black magic—no less!"

"Oh, I don't know," carelessly deprecated McLean. "Those juggler chaps seem wonderful unless you happen to hold the key to their mysteries, but, really, they're not so much."

"No?" said Garrick. "You think not?"

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

"We fellows used to do a lot of that sort of thing at college. I'm rather out of practice now, but perhaps I can show you what I mean. It's easy to do things that look impossible—if you know how."

He asked for a pack of cards, and the others pushed their chairs back from the table, the better to watch his very pretty exhibition of card-throwing, "just to get my hand in," he explained. In reality it was a device to gain time in which to perfect his audacious plan. Then, standing some distance from the table, he buttoned his coat, pulled up his sleeves, and began:

"Now, ladies and gentlemen, as you all know, I have had no opportunity to

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

make special preparation for this exhibition. I have been among you—one of you—all the evening, and a man does not carry about with him in the ordinary walk of life the mechanical paraphernalia commonly used by prestidigitateurs. Therefore, any manifestations which I may be able to make for you here you will readily recognize as unquestionable proof of the remarkable control I possess over the powers of earth and air, rather than the result of any previous preparation or present illusion. I especially disclaim any supernatural influence. What I am about to show you will be the normal and natural result of normal and natural powers legitimately used.

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

Kindly keep that in mind. Will some gentleman in the audience kindly oblige me with a five-dollar bill? Preferably a crisp, new one. Any gentleman?"

Mr. and Mrs. Baxter were frankly amused and interested, Pauline's face wore an anxious, puzzled smile, and Garrick's eyes were suspiciously narrowed. Mr. Corson sat at the end of his table, alert, unmoved, courteous, and cold.

"Thank you, Mr. Baxter," Barry buoyantly proceeded. "Now this, ladies and gentlemen, is a feat requiring the utmost skill—the greatest caution and concentration. I beg that you will not interrupt me during its performance"—here he addressed him-

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

self directly and deliberately to Mr. Corson—"and if I blunder in doing it I bespeak your patience. The trick is technically known as 'The Cat and the Canary.'"

For a moment during the pause that ensued the host's countenance remained unchanged. Then a flash of recollection woke the rigid features to life, and he leaned forward on his elbow, curiously watching.

"Here you see a five-dollar bill—crisp, new, authentic. Would you like to examine it?"

The bill was passed around the table, and Garrick furtively made a memorandum of its number on his cuff. Mr. Corson waved it aside, keeping

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

his steady eyes fixed on Barry, into whom the zest of adventure had again entered.

“Thank you. You have all examined it and know it to be exactly what it seems. Now I fold the bill into small compass—thus; I place it in the palm of my right hand—thus”—he closed his fingers over it—“and I put my right hand inside my coat—thus.” The hidden hand seemed to fumble for a moment and then was still. “Now, by a supreme effort of the will, I am going to transmute that bill into something absolutely different.” He wriggled slightly under the enveloping coat. “Into something so different that there can be no question

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

of any paltry trick. It will be genuine transformation. What shall it be? Will this do? His left hand unbuttoned the coat, but still held its edges together, while his right dragged forth something long and white which ultimately resolved itself into a delicate and beautifully wrought *robe de nuit*.

"Elihu, I think that is perfectly wonderful!" exclaimed Mrs. Baxter. "How did he do it?"

"You will find the five-dollar bill," continued Barry to Mr. Corson, "pinned to the clothes-line in your back-yard."

"Oh!" gasped Pauline, enlightened.

"By Jove!" Garrick sprang to his feet. "May I go and see?"



"HIS RIGHT DRAGGED FORTH SOMETHING LONG AND WHITE"

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

Barry stood motionless, his head thrown back, smiling slightly, and steadily meeting Mr. Corson's keen, level gaze. It was only an instant that they remained thus. The host's glance, into which amusement was creeping, flickered around the table, comprehensively touching Mrs. Baxter and Pauline; and then he began to laugh, a slow, chuckling regurgitation which, once started, apparently he could not check.

"Well, by George! That's a good one!" he ejaculated. "Phil, go and rescue that bill before it blows away! Mr. McLean, my congratulations! When I am in need of a juggler, I'll remember you. You're hard to beat!

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

The Cat and the Canary, eh? I was sure I recognized the look!"

"Perhaps you know the taste of canary yourself, sir," quietly suggested Barry.

"Eh? Well, perhaps I do! Perhaps I do!" Again his words were submerged by a wave of chuckles. "Anyway, I have known the appetite."

Garrick presently returned with the money and a slip of paper. The one was restored to Mr. Baxter; the other Mr. Corson read and tucked into his pocket, smiling whimsically at McLean as he said:

"I'll keep this—as security."

He went to the door and whispered

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

lengthy and apparently mystifying instructions to the sleepy maid, whom they found turning away from the automobile when they went out to take it a few moments later.

"Baxter," said Mr. Corson, standing on the curb with a hand on McLean's shoulder, "be sure to produce this young man at lunch to-morrow. I must know more of him. He'll go far!" Leaning towards Barry, he whispered: "You'll find another canary somewhere in your car. It's my daughter's. Return it at your convenience. I hold your note of hand."

Barry laughed jubilantly and climbed into his seat. Under pretext of tucking in the dust-robe, he squeezed

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

his wife's hand, and she flushed prettily. She did not yet understand, but she saw that he was elated and her heart was full of joy.

"By-the-way, Mr. McLean," said Mrs. Baxter, half an hour later, "I've been puzzling over the name of that wonderful trick of yours. I don't quite see the connection."

"Don't you?" Barry smiled quizzically. "That's the way the cat explained why he ate the canary."

"Oh, is it? But I don't see— Anyway, it was wonderful, wasn't it, Elihu?"

"It was clever," said her husband.

[62]

THE END

University of California
SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY
Return this material to the library
from which it was borrowed.

REC'D LD-URL

JUL 28 1988

AUG 08 1988

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



A 000 036 150 1



3 1158 01257 9560

Univer
Sout
Lib